

ELEMENTS OF COGNITIVE DESIGN

1. STRUCTURE: How the writer leads his or her reader through a work – visually, aurally, and developmentally.

Jack Hodgins compares writers to real estate agents taking perspective buyers through a house. Agents decide the order in which their clients see the house, emphasizing some aspects and not others. Writers can take audiences into their writing through the front door, the back door, the basement entrance, or even through the garage, depending on the initial impact they want their “house” to have. How they lead their readers from “room” to “room” is a conscious decision. They want their readers to see, hear, and experience their works in a specific way.

a) Visual structure: the way the text looks – for example

- Use of specific typefaces: *italics*, **bold**, CAPITALS, any change in typeface
- Length of paragraphs (short paragraphs tend to make the work choppy; long paragraphs tend to make the work feel “dignified” or “academic”)
- Sections within chapters (denoted by white space, *****, or other visual dividers ☼)
- Chapter breaks
- “books” within books
- Length of scenes
- Transitions between scenes

Questions to ask:

- ✓ Why did the writer choose to lay out/ divide his work as he or she did?
- ✓ What impact does the visual structure have on the reader?
- ✓ How does the visual structure complement the impact of the work (subject/ theme)

b) Developmental structure: the way in which the writer takes the reader through the work

- Order (chronological; argumentative; fragmented; starting somewhere other than the beginning and using techniques such as flashbacks to tell the narrative)
- Use of sub-plots

Questions to ask:

- ✓ How has the writer used the developmental structure to stress the theme at the core of the work?
- ✓ How does the structure interact with the other design elements to enhance the theme?
- ✓ What makes the structure hang together – what connects the different parts of the plot?

2. CHARACTER: The ways in which a writer has combined people and actions to represent subject and theme

- How the character acts in a specific situation
- Reasons behind a character’s actions
- The ‘morality’ connected to a character’s actions
- How the character is developed (speed; depth; through stereotypes, caricatures, or a particular physical attribute; round or flat)
- What the character tells us about him/ herself in actions words and thoughts
- How the characters interact with others
- How the characters react in situations
- How the characters react to the setting
- Purpose of a character (a means of moving along the plot; a foil for the main character)
- Number of characters

Questions to ask:

- ✓ How does the interaction of characters with others, with their setting and with the central issue aid the presentation of theme?
- ✓ How are the characters embodiments or personifications of the theme?
- ✓ What is the relationship of the characters to other design elements and ultimately to the cognitive design of the whole piece?
- ✓ Who has the power in the story?
- ✓ Whose story is left out?

3. LOCATION: The arrangement and presentation of physical and time elements in a work

- Features of the physical setting
- Relationship of that setting to the actual world
- Time of year, day, life
- Era, century, decade
- Duration of the narrative
- Relationship between time and place
- Movement from place to place
- Details of the passage of time
- Sequencing of time
- Use of time in the narrative (e.g. flashbacks, flash forwards)
- Creations of new societies (e.g. futuristic, fantastical)
- The physical height of the action and the relationship of other objects around
- The angle from which the action is viewed
- Urban vs. rural settings
- Presence of the elements (weather)

Questions to ask:

- ✓ Why has the author chosen this particular time and place for the work?
- ✓ How does the choice influence the theme of the work?
- ✓ How does location (time and place) work with the other design elements to create an overall impression?

4. TROPOLOGY: The use of image, simile, metaphor, symbol and archetype in a work to twist what is said or substitute one meaning for another (use of figurative language – or images which connote more than their literal meaning)

- Denotation(neutral word choice) and connotation (word choice which has negative or positive emotion) of figurative language
- Images- triggers to the recall of visual, smell, tactile, auditory and taste memories which the reader has of the physical object being described
- Simile- explicit comparison between two things using the words *like*, *as*, or *than*
- Metaphor- implicit analogy between two things; it depends more on the readers imagination; it is more abstract
- A symbol – a concrete representation of an abstract concept wherein the qualities of the object are reflect the characteristics of the abstract concept (e.g. rose as a symbol of love – beautiful, delicate, can hurt person holding it)
 - ✓ A symbol can be private to the author only, but with repetition through a work or a series of works, this symbol comes to vary the abstraction as well as the specific reference to an object and becomes obvious to the reader
 - ✓ Symbols are often culturally based
 - ✓ Archetype- symbol or groups of symbols that exist beneath the human consciousness; they are said to be experiences common to the human race (e.g. the journey, the hero).

Questions to ask after identifying images, similes, metaphors, etc.:

- ✓ What patterns are created by the repetition of figurative or rhetorical language (i.e. tropes)?
- ✓ What is the function of the pattern in the overall design of the piece?
- ✓ How does my understanding of tropes contribute to an understanding of the author's theme?
- ✓ How do the tropes work with each other?
- ✓ How do the tropes work with other design elements?

5. RHETORIC: The manipulation of how words are used

A) Word order

- Manipulation of common word order to create an effect

B) Word choice

- Figurative language (oxymoron, onomatopoeia, assonance, alliteration, hyperbole, understatement, irony, allusion, litotes, pun)
- Jargon, slang, dialect, colloquial, concrete
- Word complexity and abstraction

C) Sentence structure

- Sentence type (simple, compound, complex, compound-complex)
- Sentence design (loose, periodic, balanced, allowable fragments)
- Use of semi-colon, appositives, colons, dashes
- Order (natural, inverted, split)
- Type (assertive, interrogatory, imperative, exclamatory)

Questions to ask:

- ✓ How does the author draw attention to his/ her theme using the various rhetorical devices?
- ✓ How does the use of rhetorical devices complement the other design elements used by the author?

6. PERSPECTIVE (NARRATIVE VOICE): How the reader's attention is directed and controlled by the voice that's telling it

- **First person – participant, observer, reporter**
- **Second person – placing the reader in the main character's position**
- **Third – omniscient, limited omniscient (i.e. fly on the wall), reporter**

Questions to ask:

- ✓ How reliable is this narrator?
- ✓ How long ago did the events occur in relation to the telling of them?
- ✓ Has the narrator/ perspective changed over the course of the story?
- ✓ How distanced does the reader feel from the narrator and the action?
- ✓ Does the voice change over the course of the story?
- ✓ How does the narrative voice affect the other design elements?
- ✓ What impact does the narrative voice have on the authors central idea?
- ✓ What tone - speaker's attitude toward what is being described - is created by the narrator?